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SUBJECT: GORKHAS PROTEST FOR A SEPARATE STATE IN WEST BENGAL'S
DARJEELING DISTRICT

11. (SBU) Summary: Political tension have increased in West Bengal's Darjeeling area over revived local demands for a separate Gorkhaland state. Since February 19, local "godfather" and administrator of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) Subhas Ghising has been blocked by the opposition faction Gorkha Jana Mukti Morcha (GJMM) from returning to Darjeeling after his visit to New Delhi to negotiate greater local governance. The GJMM opposes Ghising and the GOWB's plan to grant Sixth Schedule Status under the Indian Constitution to the region, which would give greater powers to Communist Party of India (Marxist)-supported and Ghising-controlled DGHC. The GJMM began its latest protests on February 7 with an indefinite hunger strike of some supporters and since February 12, has shut all government offices in Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong. As a result of the worsening situation, Post issued a Department-cleared warden message advising Amcits to avoid travel to the area. In October 2007, Bimal Gurung founded the GJMM with support from Gorkha organizations. It is estimated that 75 percent of Darjeeling's 1.6 million people now support Gurung as Ghising is widely seen as corrupt, inefficient and authoritarian. A senior police officer told ConGen on January 31 that he was concerned about the worsening situation in Darjeeling as he had information indicating that Gurung was receiving weapons and support from Maoists in Nepal. A WB state official commented to ConGen that eventually statehood for Gorkhaland would likely have to be given. The recent Gorkha strife in Darjeeling reflects the dangers of identity politics among India's myriad minority groups. End Summary.

12. (U) On February 21, DGHC administrator and head of the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) Ghising spent his third day in a government cottage in Pintail village near the northern West Bengal city of Siliguri. Ghising has been unable to return to Darjeeling as hundreds of opposition faction GJMM supporters block National Highway 55 from Siliguri to the mountains. On February 19, 500 GJMM activists initially broke through police barricades protecting Pintail but more police were called and the demonstrators were pushed back.

13. (U) The GJMM's recent political agitation reflects a growing schism within the ethnic Nepalese Gorkhas, who live in the mountainous areas of northern West Bengal and have sought a form of local or separate government. The traditional Gorkha homeland includes the city of Darjeeling and picturesque towns of Kurseong and Kalimpong. The area is run with a degree of limited autonomy by the DGHC, a federation of Gorkha political

parties led by the GNLF's Subhas Ghising as chief administrator. Ghising, who has the support of the CPM, has run the DGHC and the territory as his own personal fiefdom, controlling money and patronage.

14. (SBU) The GJMM was formed recently in October 2007, when former GNLF leader Bimal Gurung openly defied Ghising's unchallenged leadership with a renewed call for a separate Gorkhaland state. Ghising, with the backing of the GOWB, proposed a form of greater local autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution rather than a new Gorkhaland state. The Sixth Schedule proposal would strengthen the DHGC and in turn strengthen Ghising's influence, giving him greater control over local budgets and administration. (Comment: Ghising is widely seen as corrupt, inefficient and authoritarian. However, the CPM GOWB also saw him as palatable and malleable in not demanding a separate Gorkhaland state. Ghising effectively was willing to remain "bought," once he gained greater control of local public funds and contracts. End Comment.) A number of rebel GNLF members, the All Gorkha Students Union (AGSU), and other Gorkha organizations have supported Gurung's new GJMM, reflecting Ghising's waning support in the Gorkha-Nepalese community.

15. (SBU) On February 7, the GJMM, with its rapidly rising popularity, launched an indefinite hunger strike. On February 12, all state and central government offices in Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong sub-divisions have been shut in response to GJMM's strike called in support of statehood. On February 13, hundreds of former army personnel - Gorkhas -- marched through the streets of Darjeeling with their service medals to form the Bharatiya Gorkha Bhutpurba Sainik Morcha, affiliated to the GJMM. The retired soldiers threatened to surrender their medals to the President of India if the demand for a separate

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state is not met. In response, GNLF-dominated local administration officials refused to collect trash provide public water or other service, claiming GJMM prevented them from performing their responsibilities. As a result of the worsening situation, Post issued a Department-cleared warden message advising Amcits to avoid travel to the area -- a popular tourist spot. A senior law enforcement official in North Bengal told post that Gurung and his GJMM have made massive inroads into Ghising's support base, undermining the GNLF and the CPM which backs it. He said that the threat of violence had risen so much that Ghising could either end-up being lynched or "disappeared," if he were not protected.

16. (U) On February 13, WB officials sought to mollify the GJMM and W. Bengal Chief Secretary A.K. Deb and Home Secretary P.R. Ray met with a seven-member GJMM delegation to discuss their demands. The GJMM leaders asked for Ghising's removal as the DGHC administrator and demanded that the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the proposed Sixth Schedule status should visit Darjeeling before making its decision regarding the areas status. On February 20, WB Municipal Affairs Minister Asok Bhattacharya said that Ghising's tenure as DHGC administrator would not be extended past its March 24 expiration.

17. (SBU) On February 20, ConGen discussed developments in Darjeeling with Special Secretary to the WB Chief Minister Mr. S. A. Ahmed (protect). Ahmed said that the GOWB had few options to respond to the GJMM's demands. He noted that it could not afford another spate of violence as occurred over the past year in Nandigram, where villagers protesting plans for a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and were brutally suppressed, with several deaths. He added that the CPM-ruled GOWB was especially reluctant now as the state was preparing for local-village level panchayat elections in May. Ahmed commented the state government could try to block food and other supplies going to the Darjeeling but he speculated that eventually, the GOWB and the GOI would likely have to concede to granting statehood to Gorkhaland area.

18. (SBU) On January 31, ConGen met with a senior WB police

official responsible for border security, who said that he thought the situation in the Darjeeling area was spiraling out of control. He also claimed that Gurung had links to Nepali Maoists and that he believed that Gurung might be receiving weapons and support from Nepali Maoists. Other post contacts have noted that Gurung has a reputation for violence and criminal activity. The official felt that since the senior Maoist leadership was now involved in the political process in Nepal, the mid-level Maoist insurgent leadership needed to be redirected and their focus engaged in other areas, or they would be discontented with their more circumscribed role in Nepal. Directing the energies of the lower level Maoist insurgents to new areas, such as the Darjeeling area in West Bengal and possibly Bhutan, would avoid the lower ranking Maoists accusing its leadership of selling out for political and personal gain as it participates in the formation of the Constituent Assembly. In his February 20 conversation with ConGen, Special Secretary Ahmed also indicated that Gurung likely had links with Nepali Maoists and on the same day, Former Chief of Staff of the Indian Army's Eastern Command Lt. General (Retd.) John Ranjan Mukherjee (protect) also agreed that there was likely that Gurung and his GJMM received some degree of support from Nepali Maoists.

¶9. (SBU) Comment: Ghising's gross corruption and incompetent administration in Darjeeling over the last few years has contributed to the latest political imbroglio giving Gurung an opportunity rise to prominence as his GJMM gains local popular support. Gurung, however, is unlikely to offer better governance for the Darjeeling area, having a reputation for violence and criminal activity. The internecine strife among the Gorkha groups demonstrates the failure of identity politics in India. Local figures seeking to capitalize on ethnic, linguistic or cultural identities often do so more for personal gain than a real concern for the promotion of their communities' interests. This pattern has been true among Assam's Bodos, the Meiteis of Manipur and the Nagas in Nagaland, to name a few other examples. The GOWB is apparently ready to ditch Ghising but the question of a new Gorkha state is far more complex and conflict is likely to continue in the Darjeeling area until the GJMM believes that some gesture is being made by the GOWB to

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move the statehood process forward with the GOI.

¶10. (U) This message was coordinated with AmEmbassy Kathmandu. JARDINE